Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/578484084

Downloaded on Mar 26, 2024

Third Eye on L.A.

Pendejolandia

BY JONNY WHITESIDE

While it's difficult to imagine what a contempo-hardcore kid would get from *Make the Music Go Bang: The Early L.A. Punk Scene*, for any long-in-the-tooth music fan who partook of punk rock (anywhere), this is a distinctly stimulating little tome. Part folkloric documentation, part extended-family scrapbook, it is, thanks to Gary Leonard's presciently snapped photographs, all-around fascinating. Laden with spectral memory jogs, faces long not seen (and faces one still wants to forget), Leonard's after-hours, gutter-perspective images are a blast to the eyeball.

Graphically, the book is a tumbling cascade of fliers and 45-sleeve reproductions swirling among tons of Leonard's pix. He captured everything from candid-cam portraits that could never have been posed but turned out perfectly (glam-doom duo Jeffrey Lee Pierce and Texacala Jones, Pleasant Gehman trying to get an autograph from an extremely stoned Jerry Lee Lewis, Darby Crash gargling suds with a Ken-doll-ish USC frat brat) to numerous configurations of LAPD goons (riot squads, skirmish lines, charging on horseback, shoving handcuffed kids into cop cars), packed nightclub floors, stage dives, flying musicians, club marquees, backstage hijinks and plenty of drunked-up goofballs mugging for the camera. Some photos are quite extraordinary (Black Randy overseeing a trio of singing midgets), others terrifying (we see way more of Rhythm Pig Gil T's bare gut than anyone needs to). Though this is admittedly a hit-and-miss, here-there-but-not-necessarily-everywhere collection, it goes out with nary a shot of El Duce or the Mentors, but overall there's little to bitch about.

MAKE THE MUSIC GO BANG: The Early L.A. Punk Scene
Edited by DON SNOWDEN
Photographs by GARY LEONARD
St. Martin's Griffin
180 pages
$18 paperback

The text, comprising a dozen, er, essays (for lack of a better word) from musicians, journalists and scenesters, is a kaleidoscopic collection of reminiscences that range from the hilarious to the embarrassing. Editor Don Snowden sets it all up with a reminder of how absolutely closed-off and lifeless L.A. nightclub culture was in the mid-'70s, then turns loose the baying pack to follow their own particular scents. Many are vastly entertaining: Keith Morris' account of Black Flag and the Circle Jerks' formation rings with the playful guerrilla brutality that has always typified his music; Masque kingpin Brendan Mullen's entry, with his sardonic, updated–Evelyn Waugh perspective, is a delightfully accurate account of the movement and the music's implosion; Pleasant Gehman's recollection of Hollywood's beer-sodden abandon, Phast Phreddie's tour of now-defunct sites and Louis Perez's account of Los Lobos' initial safaris into "Weird Hair Pendejolandia" — as misfits in a culture of misfits — are at once breezy and engrossing.

Other entries are so self-involved as to be opaque: Kristine McKenna bends over backward to paint a connection between punk rock and fine art (they share, she daintily points out, a common "raison d'être"), but, as in all such games of sociocultural Twister, falls flat on her over-educated ass — particularly when she declares, "The Mentors, the Germs . . . espoused a slash-and-burn philosophy identical to that of much European performance art of the '60s and '70s." Chris Morris delivers a batch of "me, myself & I" noncommentary focusing on roots-rock rather than the book's subject; both Don Waller's and Claude Bessy's exercises in terrorist typing are brain-crampingly overblown. Exene pens the closing cop-out passage — she, like Bessy, "doesn't remember" many specifics of the era. Deliberate amnesia seems an odd way of reasserting one's hip quotient, but perhaps it's the least painful route toward publicly reconciling the musicians' across-the-board failure to follow through on the challenge of punk rock.

Ultimately, the book leads one to examine the contemporary efforts of the punk rockers covered herein, and it's a depressing landscape. The only performers who survived with dignity are the dead (Darby, Black Randy, Jeffrey Lee Pierce — all figures for whom that quality was, in life, a non-issue) or those, like the Ramones, who never fooled around stylistically and had the grace to just hang it up. Virtually the entire remainder of the movement has degenerated into self-parody: Exene's recording of the Unabomber Manifesto, Tito Larriva's bloated Adult Contemporary balladry, the embarrassing proliferation of (barf) self-proclaimed poets, Jello Biafra's strident preaching to the converted, and the droning acoustic-folk escape route, from the mid-'80s X-Knitters to today's Dils-Cowboy Nation. It's all so weak, and even more distressing for the fact that these people inadvertently reshaped the course of Western pop culture, only to see it turned into a form of commerce whose rewards have consistently eluded them.

Perhaps *inadvertent* is the key word here — the glorious fluke of punk rock's no-future psychology was, at core, all about sheer unexpected momentum. Dreams travel fast — and we all got left behind — but *Make the Music Go Bang*, at least, provides an invigorating flea dip of nostalgia that helps one shake off the pestilence of this dreary post-rock-&-roll era.

Music

GARY LEONARD

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com